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ABSTRACT

Each classroom has certain beliefs and values, traditions and rituals, roles, expectations, and materials that contribute to a distinct classroom culture. This paper views and interprets children's experience in centers as socially constructed, dynamic, and situated in multiple, interdependent, cultural, and historical contexts. The paper provides a history of centers, and rethinks the purpose and process of centers. Centers are presented and conducted for different purposes based on the historical background of the grade, as well as the curriculum philosophy of the educators in the school. (Contains several color illustrations and 10 references.) (NKA)

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Introduction:

Classrooms are a social environments. Each classroom has certain beliefs and values, traditions and rituals, roles, expectations and materials that contribute to a distinct classroom culture. The classroom culture also includes multiple activities that can incorporate students' peer culture, home culture, or community culture. Barbara Rogoff (1995) observes sociocultural activity from three different planes: participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. This multi-layered view of a classroom activity provides an in-depth view of the many influences attributing to the social development of students. One classroom activity that has been weaved into primary classrooms is centers. Using a sociocultural perspective this paper will view and interpret children's experience in centers as socially constructed, dynamic and situated in multiple, interdependent, cultural and historical contexts.

History of Centers:

Centers were introduced to primary classrooms after biologist, Piaget introduced his stages of intellectual development that correlated

"an intrinsic relation between the self regulations which determine a living organism, the knowing behavior which structures and regulates the organism's interaction with the environment, and the individual development of intelligence" (Furth, 1969, p.18). This theory validated the importance of children interacting with their environment based on the dynamic nature of knowledge.

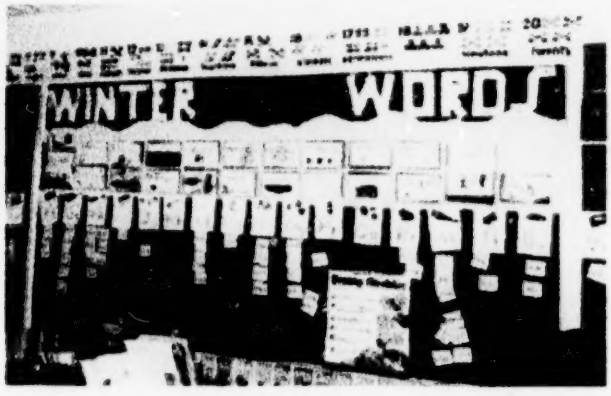
As centers entered the classroom, curriculum reflected society's attempt to correlated a variety of intellectual stage theories into school culture. Piaget's theory on children's role-taking ability (1965), Erikson's (1968) theory on a life span development of psychosocial crisis, Freud's (1965) psychodynamic theory, Pavlov's (Hall et al., 1978) Nobel prize winning behavioral theory, and Skinner's (1948) work with rats and pigeons in his operant conditioning theory, were introduced to society and influenced the development of school curriculum. The variety of theories that were being introduced to society and incorporated into classroom practice gave different overall agendas to centers at different grade levels. Play centers were most prevalent in pre-schools and kindergartens. Centers in first grade focused on a combination of early reading and writing skills with play concepts interspersed. Second grade centers were stations with themes that focused around literary, scientific or math concepts. As the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) was introduced to society, the social construction of learning became understood as collective. Vygotsky viewed human development as collective rather than individualistic and this underlying principle translated into classroom practices and in center construction. Group learning, collaboration with a more knowledgeable other, a project oriented curriculum were added to classroom practice. Sociocultural theory and especially the work of

William Corsaro (1997) is refocusing society's lens on the role of children in our society today. Corsaro's theory of interpretive reproduction implies that children co-construct reality through their "interpretive and creative participation in society" (p.18). This new theory of childhood which incorporates children in the situated social construction of knowledge leads us to reconceptualize the purpose and process of developing classroom centers.

Rethinking the Purpose of Centers:

Centers in classrooms have had many historical purposes. In light of Corsaro's view of childhood (p.18) centers should serve the purpose of intersecting school and peer cultures in meaningful activities. Teachers have varying degrees of comfort with incorporating peer culture into classroom events. "Despite the importance of social development and the vast amount of current research in this area, many educators resist the notion that children's social concerns should be a central consideration in designing classrooms and planning curricula" (Ramsey, 1991, p. 8). Teachers have the ultimate challenge in understanding the historical roots that have created the classrooms of today with developing visionary concepts of the classrooms of tomorrow. Successful teachers contain the personal attributes of self-knowledge, self-analysis, self-acceptance, community knowledge, empathy, and the ability to function in chaos (Haberman and Post, 1998). Cheryl Coats, a progressive first grade teacher from the Columbus City Schools, naturally designs the classroom to support peer culture. Her main curricular focus is the expectations and norms of the school culture documented in her course

of studies. Evidence of Cheryl's support of childhood and peer culture are displayed in the design of her room.



A word wall at the eye level of a first grader, rather than dictionaries, is displayed across the classroom. Children decide through multiple activities which words to add to the wall. The children use these words for a reference in their personal writing, for categorizing in a word study center, and for clarity in interactive writing. The process of creating a word wall incorporates school and peer culture on many sociocultural planes. Through *apprenticeship* (Rogoff, 1995) the teacher and students co-construct the word wall, a culturally organized activity, where the children become more responsible participants. The children use the word wall by rotating and removing the words to manage their own writing and reading behavior. Through *guided participation* (Rogoff, 1995), in which children observe and participate in the culturally constructed activity of creating a word wall, they transform previous cultural practices that dictated writing and reading instruction. At the same time a third plane, *participatory appropriation* (Rogoff, 1995), is in effect. Individually children are creating an understanding of the social nature

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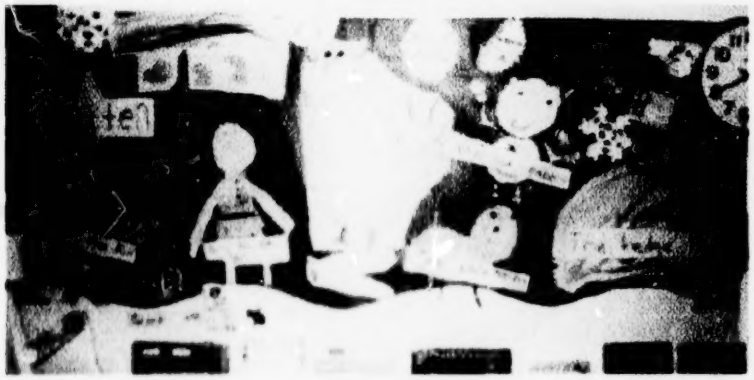
of learning. Through participatory appropriation learning will shift into other socially created activities that are present in this classroom.

Rethinking the Process of Centers:

The social dynamics that incorporate school and peer beliefs, values, traditions, rituals, roles, expectations and materials contribute to a distinct classroom culture. These dynamics are the cornerstones for meaningful centers. Children in Cheryl Coat's first grade show the dynamic nature of their theme based center on snow.

Throughout the week the first graders added labels to the mural and read and reread books on snow.



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During the development process Cheryl Coats incorporated the children's peer culture in the discussion of the stories during read alouds, the individual and collaboratively designed mural, and the co-construction of labels with interactive writing. The children could read familiar books together, design characters for the mural or label the characters they created at this center. Every activity was filled with collective meaning that reflected the social dynamics of the classroom.

In an equally fabulous first grade classroom in The Columbus City Schools, Susan Giangardella also values the integration of school and peer culture in the creation of centers in first grade. Through apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation in a variety of classroom writing and reading activities the play center was co-constructed with the social dynamics of the classroom culture.

The children's family cultures were integrated through independent writing and the class socially constructed the piece of interactive writing

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on the mural. When children would participate in this center their schemas were activated from their previous class work on barbecues and picnics.

Conclusion:

Every classroom has a different make up of culture. Centers are presented and conducted for different purposes based on the historical background of the grade as well as the curriculum philosophy of the educators in the school. Teachers today can transform centers to be a richer educational experience through an examination of the purpose and process of centers in their classrooms. Recognizing the curriculum opportunities that are available through participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship can be a first step to transforming centers in elementary classrooms. Children can co-construct centers in the classroom through social contributions that incorporate peer and family contexts. Learning is socially constructed and inviting childhood into the planning of classroom curricula will provide a richer more authentic center experience for primary children.

Lisa J. Brandt
June 1, 1999

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